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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001095

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KGOV KDEM BG
SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT'S PHOTO VOTER LIST PILOT PROJECT A
SUCCESS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Geeta Pasi for reasons 1.4(d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Bangladesh Election Commission's
three-week pilot project to test new methodologies for
compiling the voter list officially ended on June 28. The
pilot, which took place in Sreepur north of Bangladesh,
registered approximately 46,000 voters and tested different
data collection methods to create a voter list with
photographs. END SUMMARY.

THREE-WEEK PILOT ENDED JUNE 28
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¶2. (SBU) On June 10, the Bangladesh Election Commission began
a three-week project to test different methodologies and
technologies for preparing a voter list with photographs
(photo voter list, or PVL).   Election Commission workers,
with significant assistance from the Army, set up 30
registration centers in Sreepur, a town of approximately
44,000 voters located in Gazipur municipality about 20 miles
north of Dhaka. The pilot project officially ended on June
¶28. Consultants from the United Nations Development Program
(UNDP) also worked closely with the Election Commission to
develop the pilot.

¶3. (SBU) The process of registering people for the PVL varies
considerably from previous practice in Bangladesh. Earlier,
enumerators would go door-to-door, preparing fresh lists
every five years for parliamentary elections. The ability to
update the list was limited because the data was not
computerized or even alphabetically or geographically
organized. People were sometimes given a receipt with their
voter number on it, without which it would be difficult to
find their names on the voter list. This meant that on
election day, voters without that receipt were dependent on
political party camps located outside of voting centers to
give them their registration numbers. According to some
election observation missions, this was an invitation to
electoral fraud.

PROVISIONAL VOTER ID A MAJOR INCENTIVE
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¶4. (SBU) The pilot in Sreepur tested two methods for
registering people, both of which required voters to visit
registration centers. All people over 16 years of age could
be registered; though the voting age is 18, election
officials wanted to make sure the list created included all
those who would be eligible to vote in December 2008, when
parliamentary elections are anticipated. As an incentive to

go to the centers, prospective voters were offered a
laminated provisional voter identity card when they
registered. According to diplomats who visited the Sreepur
pilot, people indicated to them the ID card was a major
reason they went to register.

¶5. (SBU) The overall voter registration plan includes
provisions to use the initial voter list data collection
process as a jumping-off point for the collection of data for
a national identity card. According to the Election
Commission, the voter registry will not be dependent on
completion of the national ID card program, which according
to the Bangladesh government could take up to five years.

¶6. (SBU) During the pilot, the Election Commission tested two
types of software, both of which had been procured by the
Army shortly after the declaration of the state of emergency
on January 11 (Reftel). Different types of digital cameras
and computer equipment were also used to see which systems
worked best and minimized the time required to register each
voter. At the initiative of the Army, they also tried out
different types of portable fingerprint scanners for eventual
use in the national ID card project. According to UNDP,
tenders for the procurement of some equipment have already
been released. Companies will have 40 days to submit bids
for review. The Election Commission has stressed to us they
plan to follow Bangladesh procurement law to the letter to
ensure the bidding is free of corruption.

ARMY PLAYING MAJOR ROLE
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¶7. (SBU) According to diplomats from donor countries who
visited the pilot, the Army was "very present" at

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registration centers. Although the Election Commission has
tried to downplay the Army's role, Army officers in Sreepur
characterized the situation as "the Election Commission is
supporting us," rather than the other way around.   One
diplomat described the role of the civilians as "auxiliary"
to the Army, taking the form of enumerators and data entry
operators.

POSITIVE -- BUT QUALIFIED -- REVIEWS
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¶8. (SBU) Election Commission officials are heralding the
pilot as a success, claiming that even more than the expected
44,000 voters had been registered during the process. (NOTE:
Accurate population statistics are difficult to get, and the
initial 44,000 figure was only an estimate based on census
and previous voter list data.) The Commission has said it
will announce an elections "roadmap" by July 15. One
expected element of this roadmap will be the announcement of
voter registration in Rajshahi, Bangladesh's fifth largest
city, by mid-August, with Khulna and Dhaka to follow soon
after. Because of resource and budget constraints, the
Commission cannot conduct registration throughout the entire
country simultaneously, but has opted instead for a "rolling"
registration focusing on the most difficult and fraud-prone
areas first. According to one donor's estimate, this means
running about 170 Sreepur-like operations at any one time
over the next twelve months.

¶9. (C) Several diplomats who visited the pilot said the
Bangladeshis were much further along in the development of
the process than they had expected. While praising the
efficiency of the process, several donors are asking the
Commission and UNDP for an outside organization to check the
accuracy of the pilot list. Two of the biggest potential
donors to the PVL project, the European Commission and the
United Kingdom's Department for International Development,
have also asked how the Election Commission and UNDP plan to
incorporate "lessons learned" from the Sreepur exercise into
the overall PVL strategy.

COMMENT: A SUCCESSFUL STEP, BUT SERIOUS QUESTIONS REMAIN
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¶10. (C) The new voter registration process has enormous
potential to improve the way elections in Bangladesh operate.
 While the pilot appears to have gone better than expected,
there remain several unresolved issues like the role of the
Army in the overall registration process, and how a country
lacking data protection legislation will guarantee
registration information is properly controlled and not
misused. Most challenging, however, is the scale of the task
ahead: expanding a successful but limited pilot to reach the
estimated 70 to 80 million potential voters within the
one-year timeframe the Election Commission has set for
itself, especially given the lack of basic infrastructure and
skilled information technology workers outside major urban
areas.
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